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Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 3 November 2016, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Maleki (Vice-Chair) ..... (Islamic Republic of Iran)
later: Mr. Drobnjak (Chair) ..... (Croatia)

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In the absence of Mr. Drobnjak (Croatia), Mr. Maleki (Islamic Republic of Iran), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 49: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (*continued*) (A/71/13, A/71/335, A/71/340, A/71/343 and A/71/350)

1. **Mr. Zehnder** (Switzerland) said that his delegation, concerned by the repeated violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law committed in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, called for greater protection and accountability. All parties to the conflict were obligated to ensure the rapid and unobstructed passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need.

2. The risk of isolated and distressed people becoming radicalized or choosing to escape desperate conditions was high given the ongoing deterioration of the security, political and socioeconomic situation in the region. It was therefore of critical importance that UNRWA continue to play a stabilizing role by maintaining an adequate level of its services. UNRWA had been repeatedly underfunded over the past decade, leaving its short-term coping mechanisms exhausted and limiting the Agency's capacity to provide quality services to Palestine refugees. UNRWA was almost completely dependent on voluntary contributions, which did not keep pace with either the growing number of refugees or the increasing need in the region. In that light, he encouraged efforts targeted at ensuring sufficient, predictable and sustained funding of the Agency for the duration of its mandate. Such efforts could include consultations with Member States, international financial institutions and United Nations stakeholders with a view to securing enhanced support. That included voluntary as well as assessed contributions.

3. Switzerland would continue to support UNRWA reforms, in particular its resource-mobilization strategy, as well as the systematic implementation of its protection framework. His Government stood ready to contribute to a longer-term consultative process on the Agency's funding structure aimed at ensuring adequate assistance and protection to Palestine refugees. Switzerland was also committed to supporting UNRWA efforts to promote the respect of the rights of Palestine refugees until a negotiated and lasting solution was reached.

4. **Mr. AlJarallah** (Kuwait) said that his delegation greatly appreciated the efforts of UNRWA, but was concerned that the funding shortfall would impair the Agency's ability to deliver services in fulfilment of its mandate. He stressed the need to find more innovative ways of enabling the United Nations regular budget to cover the Agency's escalating costs. The shortfall placed a particular burden on countries that hosted UNRWA operations.

5. The report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (A/71/13) had detailed the suffering of Palestine refugees as a result of the control exerted by the Israeli occupation over every aspect of their lives. His country renewed its call on the international community to pressure Israel, the occupying Power, to comply with international resolutions and to cease its systematic destruction of Palestinian infrastructure and ongoing violations of the most basic human rights. He also called on the international community to implement the relevant resolutions, in particular General Assembly resolution 194 (III), paragraph 11, which affirmed the right of return for Palestine refugees. The alternative was to put Palestinian youth, who had lost all hope for a life of dignity, at risk of recruitment by terrorist organizations.

6. Over the years, his country had contributed over $169 million to UNRWA. Most recently, it had made an emergency donation of $15 million to ensure continued schooling for some 500,000 Palestinian students. Over the preceding four years, Kuwait had also allocated $50 million to support Palestine refugees in Syria. In 2009, it had contributed $24 million after Israel, the occupying Power, had destroyed some 36 UNRWA schools in Gaza. He was pleased to reconfirm his country's pledge of $200 million over the next three years made at the 2014 Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza. As a member of the UNRWA Advisory Commission, Kuwait would continue to make its voluntary annual contribution, which it had increased to $2 million as of 2011.

7. **Mr. Zaayman** (South Africa) said that his Government had contributed $218,812 to UNRWA which, in testament to the commitment of the international community, had educated over 500,000 children, and provided primary health care consultations to over 9.1 million and social safety net assistance to 290,000 people in the past year in addition to ensuring that over 36,000 shelters were rehabilitated or constructed.

8. That notwithstanding, the particularly dire situation in the Gaza Strip made it essential for the international community to continue providing

financial support to the Agency. South Africa would continue to provide financial support to the Palestinian people through the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility Fund for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation (IBSA Fund) and, in cooperation with the Palestinian authorities and other international organizations, it would support projects in Nablus and Gaza. In the former, his Government was involved in a project which, once operational, would offer activities for adults with disabilities, including vocational training. And in Gaza, the IBSA Fund had provided support to rehabilitate the Cultural and Hospital Centre for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in the Gaza Strip.

9. To rejuvenate the trade-oriented and aid-dependent Gaza economy, it was crucial that the blockade be lifted. South Africa was particularly concerned by the effect of the coastal blockade on the fisheries industry, which had the potential to create jobs and foster economic growth. As concluded in the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, it was incumbent upon the international community to address the humanitarian issues faced by Palestine refugees. Ending the 50-year illegal occupation of Palestine must be a priority in that regard. The international community should encourage the parties to restart negotiations to that end, which should be accomplished through the adoption of a lasting and viable peace settlement ensuring a fully fledged Palestinian State existing side-by-side with Israel, within internationally recognized borders. His Government strongly supported calls for 2017 to be declared the International Year to End Israeli Occupation. That would assist in preserving the two-State solution and providing lasting security for Israel and Palestine.

10. **Mr. Ben Sliman** (Tunisia) said that challenges on the operational level and ongoing regional turmoil placed an ever-increasing strain on the services provided by UNRWA. That was in addition to continued financial constraints and the harsh measures imposed by Israeli authorities. The lives of Palestine refugees continued to be severely affected by the brutal Israeli occupation. With more than a quarter living in poverty and facing unemployment, they were in dire need of humanitarian aid. Moreover, half a million school-aged children were in need of quality education.

11. The worrisome 10-year blockade of Gaza, which amounted to collective punishment, was a blatant violation of international humanitarian law. In Gaza, people's access to humanitarian aid, basic health care and reconstruction materials was still hindered, impeding economic and social recovery. Nearly half of the households there remained without food security or regular access to clean water and electricity.

12. The occupation by Israel, the harsh living conditions it imposed, as well as its denial of the fundamental right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, were at the core of the question of Palestine. The time had come for the international community, in particular the Security Council, to shoulder its responsibility and put an end to the Israeli occupation, especially as the current situation threatened to give way to further tensions in a region already fraught with conflict and instability.

13. **Mr. Rivero Rosario** (Cuba) said that UNRWA now faced its gravest financial crisis since its establishment, a situation that endangered the existence of 700 schools in the Middle East. Ensuring that half a million children continued to receive an education deserved the consideration of the international community. Despite the financial difficulties and the challenges confronting it, including restricted movements and obstructed access to zones of operation, the Agency continued to achieve much in the area of education, health care and protection. The violations of human rights and international instruments by Israeli armed and security forces should cease.

14. Cuba wished to reaffirm its unequivocal solidarity with the Palestinian people and joined those who called for an end to the long-standing, unjust and illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel. The cruel blockade of the Gaza Strip should be eliminated without condition, the movement of persons facilitated and the difficulties faced by Palestine refugees resolved, all in accordance with the standards and principles of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

15. His Government would continue to support the fight of the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and to establish their own independent and sovereign State within the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

16. **Ms. Ziade** (Lebanon) said that the protracted refugee and crisis situation should not be forgotten. There were 5.2 million Palestine refugees, accounting for more than 40 per cent of long-term refugees worldwide. They were scattered in the occupied State of Palestine and neighbouring host countries and faced political, social and economic uncertainties. UNRWA remained a stabilizing factor for them.

17. For over six decades, many thousands of Palestine refugees had benefited from UNRWA services, including education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement. But the core existence of the Agency and its ability to deliver services were jeopardized by a

chronic shortfall in funds in its core budget programme. Its dire financial situation was exacerbated by tightened measures and restrictions imposed by Israel, impacting the quality of services provided by the Agency to the 1.3 million refugees under siege in Gaza and the 800,000 living in the West Bank.

18. The international community should ensure the financial stability of the UNRWA budget and increase the predictability of the Agency's resources, which would strengthen the services provided to those refugees and restore their trust in the Agency. Lebanon stood ready to continue working constructively with partners to ensure a sound financial budget that would enable UNRWA to fulfil its mandate. Only a strong and reliable Agency would enhance the resilience of Palestine refugees pending further efforts by the international community to achieve a just and durable peace in the Middle East.

19. Lebanon was hosting 400,000 Palestine refugees and 30,000 Palestine refugees fleeing the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, representing almost 10 per cent of the population. Those refugees continued to face multiple challenges, including lack of financial resources, minimal health services, interruption of other primary services provided by UNRWA, overcrowding of the 12 densely populated refugee camps, and the erosion of hope in the peace process or the two-State solution. Lebanon had borne witness to the severe impact on the Palestine refugees and their host communities of the decline and severe reduction in UNRWA services as a result of continued structural and chronic financial shortfalls. In that regard, the competent Lebanese authorities had been working and would continue to work closely with UNRWA to address the needs of those refugees in full compliance with Lebanon's Constitution and legal framework.

20. Lebanon had been working with Palestinian representatives through the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee to address socioeconomic and security challenges. Lebanon, a country where resettlement was contrary to the Constitution, had made strides in that direction, including the adoption of a law to regulate the access of Palestinians to the Lebanese labour market, improved education and strengthened security measures. Much remained to be done, however, and Lebanon could not face the task alone.

21. During the February donor conference in London, the Lebanese delegation had included the reconstruction of the Nahr El Bared camp in its presentation on urgent national infrastructure needs.

22. She wished to reiterate her country's appreciation for the generosity of donors from Arab regional States, Germany, and the latest European Union donation of 12 million euros in October. However, Lebanon was still $120 million short of the required amount. The factors associated with prolonged displacement could destabilize its northern region. Moreover, the Nahr El-Bared relief services budget, which had already dwindled from $18.8 million in 2010 to $8.8 million in 2014, was expected to decrease further to $5.3 million — a trend that was distressing to both the refugees and her Government, and which should be reversed in order to meet the refugees' growing needs.

23. Donors were once again urged to fully cover the UNRWA appeal for $414 million in 2016 to meet the basic humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis. It was alarming that only 37 per cent of that appeal had been funded. Lebanon commended donors for their contributions and encouraged them to continue to assist the Agency.

24. Political will to resume the peace process based on the parameters set by the Madrid principles, the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant General Assembly resolutions, in particular resolution 194 (III), was urgently needed.

25. **Mr. Bin Momen** (Bangladesh) said that the sense of dispossession and injustice felt among Palestine refugees was further exacerbated by recurring armed attacks, violence, the expansion of settlements, and other human rights violations. Bangladesh was confident, however, that UNRWA could, under enabling circumstances, fulfil its mandate and commended the Agency's medium-term strategy for 2016-2021.

26. The safety and security of UNRWA staff was a matter of grave concern; there was no justification for the killing and abduction of United Nations personnel serving on the ground. Nor was there any excuse for the wanton destruction of emergency shelters, homes, schools and civilian infrastructure. The highest priority should be accorded to protecting United Nations personnel serving in any volatile or complex situation; Bangladesh urged the Security Council to remain seized of the matter.

27. Palestine refugees based in the Syrian Arab Republic were increasingly vulnerable and deserved more attention from the international community. He welcomed the efforts of UNRWA to cooperate with that host country and host communities, and called upon all concerned to ensure the Agency's unhindered access and assistance to the Palestine refugees.

28. The Agency, which was providing services to nearly 5.4 million Palestine refugees, required sufficient resources to respond to the growing need for

humanitarian and emergency services. However, it faced a financial shortfall of about $74 million. The funding shortfall should not become a recurring problem. International donors were therefore urged to provide increased, predictable and sustainable contributions.

29. In line with its commitment to the international refugee protection regime, his Government would continue to advocate for Palestine refugees. Having experienced a large-scale refugee crisis, Bangladesh empathized with their plight. During the coming year, which would mark 50 years of the occupation, Member States were urged to implement special programmes and initiatives to reverse that situation. The international community should give due attention to the rights and needs of the Palestine refugees.

30. **Mr. Gunnarsson** (Iceland) said that it was unfortunate that the Committee must once again focus on the financial difficulties of UNRWA instead of its good work on behalf of Palestine refugees in such areas as education and health care. The international community greatly appreciated the efforts of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA and his team, and understood the difficulties they faced on a daily basis. The horror faced by the people of the Syrian Arab Republic over the past five years was indescribable. The situation in Aleppo was a tragedy that must come to an end. The conflict in that country had brought bloodshed and destruction to Palestine refugees and other members of Syrian society, with the more than half a million Palestinians registered with UNRWA in that country among the worst affected. The Palestine refugees often had fewer coping mechanisms than their Syrian counterparts, as their options to travel legally outside the Syrian Arab Republic were severely restricted.

31. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking on a point of order, said that the agenda item under discussion was UNRWA. The topic at hand was Palestine refugees, not Syria or Aleppo. He asked the speaker to restrict his remarks to the agenda item.

32. **The Chair** asked the representative of Iceland to restrict his statement to the topic under the agenda item.

33. **Mr. Gunnarsson** (Iceland) said that the Palestine refugees who had fled the Syrian conflict to Lebanon were particularly vulnerable, given border restrictions, their precarious legal status in that country and limited social protection services. About 93 per cent of those people were highly dependent on UNRWA for a broad range of regular and humanitarian assistance, which was unacceptable. On a positive note, when 6,000 Palestine refugee families had returned to their homes in Husayniyah, UNRWA had been able to successfully resume services for them — reopening the health centre, the community centre and four schools serving more than 3,300 students, some of whom had missed more than two years of school. Although such cases were rare, they were indicative of the essential role played by UNRWA with regard to the Palestine refugee population.

34. The complex political context in Lebanon caused difficulty for Palestine refugees there. Reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp in northern Lebanon was slow; even nine years after its destruction, not all residents had been able to return to it.

35. In Gaza, due to the ongoing Israeli blockade, almost the entire Palestinian population was dependent on aid to meet basic needs. There was a limit to what UNRWA and other humanitarian actors could do. Iceland was proud to have been able to provide additional funding to UNRWA in the past year. While the financial situation of the Agency was not as dire as it had been in 2015, it remained precarious. It was therefore imperative to find a sustainable solution. Subsistence living only increased the sense of despair and insecurity suffered by the Palestinian people.

36. UNRWA was key to preventing conflict in the region, and without it, the situation could grow much worse. Until a just and lasting solution was found for the Palestine refugee population as a whole, UNRWA would continue to be needed. In that light, the international community should make every effort to honour its responsibilities towards the refugees. His Government had and would continue to support UNRWA and encouraged other Member States to do the same.

37. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the situation of the Palestine refugees was not merely a humanitarian catastrophe, but also a political, legal and ethical issue. Since 1949, UNRWA had been an eyewitness to Palestinian suffering, as well as itself a target of the Israeli occupation forces. During the recent attack on Gaza, UNRWA personnel had been murdered and UNRWA schools had been destroyed even as refugees were sheltering inside them. Meanwhile, the international community appeared powerless to implement General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and other resolutions on the Israeli occupation, which merely emboldened Israel to continue to deny the right of Palestinians to return to their homes.

38. The host States that had welcomed Palestine refugees should also be regarded as donor States, given the enormous services and assistance that they were

called upon to provide. His country was treating the refugees living on its soil as Syrian citizens, without discrimination, until such time as they could exercise their right of return. During a recent visit to the Syrian Arab Republic, the Commissioner-General had expressed his appreciation for the facilities provided to UNRWA by the Syrian Government.

39. The Syrian Arab Republic spared no effort to protect Palestine refugees from attacks by armed terrorist groups. Palestinians in the Yarmouk camp were being besieged from within by the Nusrah Front and other terrorist groups known to have foreign ties. On several occasions, UNRWA had complained that it was unable to deliver assistance to that camp because Agency personnel had been barred entry by armed groups. What the terrorists were doing to Palestine refugees in Syria was part of a larger plot to disperse them still further afield in order to prevent them from ever returning to their homes in accordance with the relevant international resolutions.

40. All the delegations present must have found it odd to hear the representative of the Israeli occupation forces express "concern" for Palestine refugees and UNRWA personnel in Syria. As everyone was aware, the primary cause of Palestinian suffering was Israel, which, not content with having turned the Palestinians into refugees in the first place, was attacking them in the places to which they had fled, while at the same time criticizing UNRWA for providing humanitarian assistance. UNRWA should continue to provide that assistance in accordance with General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), which had established the Agency, and General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which guaranteed Palestine refugees compensation and the right of return.

41. **Ms. Krisnamurthi** (Indonesia) said that her Government was an ongoing supporter of the work of UNRWA, which had been invaluable to so many refugees since its establishment in 1949. In that connection the financial crisis plaguing the Agency was deeply worrying. While the number of registered refugees continued to grow, the resources available to the Agency had dwindled alarmingly. The current funding gap of $74 million placed at risk the ability of UNRWA to maintain its operations through the end of that year. Consistent with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, Indonesia encouraged support from a broader range of donors, with diminished earmarking and increased multi-year funding, in order to close the existing gap. In that vein, her delegation welcomed the increasing engagement of the World Bank and multilateral development banks, improvements in access to concessional development financing for affected communities, and the support of the private sector, host countries and civil society to refugee communities.

42. Addressing the root cause of displacement — namely, Israel's continued occupation of Palestine — was essential to addressing the refugee problem itself. It was unrealistic to discuss the refugee issue separately from the right to return when the conflict was over. With increasingly aggressive and intensive settlement in Occupied Territory, the question of Palestine threatened to become a permanent problem. In their reports to the Security Council, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator had stressed that the establishment of a Palestinian State would help to address Israeli security concerns and yield major dividends for both parties to the conflict as well as the entire region. Member States should not lose sight of the issue of Palestine refugees among other existing conflicts. Instead, they should address the causes of the issue so as not to have to labour over the consequences.

43. **Mr. Sobral Duarte** (Brazil) said that his delegation continued to recognize the vital role played by UNRWA in providing humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees across the Middle East. Regrettably, however, the Agency remained under pressure and no visible progress had been achieved towards the two-State solution.

44. The recent wave of tensions and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the expansion of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, and the persistent restrictions on economic and humanitarian activities in Gaza exacerbated the challenges faced by the Agency. Meanwhile, the worsening conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic had forced thousands of Palestine refugees enjoying safety there to seek shelter elsewhere in the region and beyond, including in Brazil. Given that dire scenario, the endeavours of UNRWA deserved the unmitigated support of the United Nations and its Member States.

45. The unprecedented financial crisis impacting UNRWA was a cause for deep concern. The Agency needed sufficient funding to carry out its activities effectively and in a predictable manner. To that end, a greater share of UNRWA funding, including for substantive projects, should be derived from the regular budget of the United Nations. The Secretariat of the Advisory Commission of UNRWA should strive for greater efficiency in preparing regular reports and

circulating draft decisions, thus enabling the Agency to be even more effective in its everyday activities. In recent years, his Government had increased its cooperation with UNRWA through voluntary financial contributions and food assistance, as well as bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including medical projects implemented by the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility Fund for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation in Gaza.

46. The draft resolutions to be adopted by the General Assembly would extend the mandate of UNRWA until June 2020. His delegation hoped that such renewals for the Agency, which was never intended to be a permanent fixture of the Organization, would not be necessary in future. The international community should ensure that Palestinians had an independent, free and viable State to live in, and that they no longer had to rely on international assistance for their fundamental needs. It should work towards a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and turn the two-State solution into a reality.

47. **Ms. Özgür** (Turkey) said that UNRWA, was subject to an ever greater degree of pressure due to the expanding refugee population and their worsening living conditions, aggravated by complex regional developments. UNRWA continued to be threatened by insufficient resources. Despite the measures taken in recent years to secure sustained and predictable financing for the essential services it provided, much remained to be done to bolster its financial stability. As Chair of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, Turkey wished to propose a change of approach to UNRWA finances, including long-term financial commitment by Member States, the implementation of innovative funding, and the widening of the donor base. The international community was strongly encouraged to fulfil its pledges and to redouble its efforts to enable UNRWA to effectively respond to the needs of the Palestine refugees.

48. Turkey had contributed $1.5 million in cash to UNRWA in 2016, and 59,000 tons of flour — amounting to another $27.4 million — since 2011. Her country would continue to make such contributions.

49. Turkey would serve as Vice-Chair of the Advisory Commission in July 2017 and as Chair in 2018. In those capacities, it would continue to emphasize the need to provide sufficient, sustainable and predictable funding to UNRWA. Turkey looked forward to the upcoming visit of the Commissioner-General, The solidarity it felt with Palestine refugees, as well as its support for the work of UNRWA in the region, would be ongoing.

59. **Mr. Al Neama** (Qatar) said that until the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict reached a final settlement that included the right of return in accordance with international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, including General Assembly resolution 194 (III), the international community would continue to have a humanitarian and legal obligation to provide Palestine refugees with assistance. The services provided by UNRWA at least provided a bare minimum of health care, education, food, shelter, social services, and protection in the face of escalating violence in the West Bank and the siege imposed on Gaza. The burdens created by recent regional instability only added to the chronic funding gaps in the UNRWA programme budget, and put an even greater premium on efficient use of resources. He commended UNRWA for following the framework set out in its medium-term strategy for 2010-2015 while maintaining a high quality of services.

51. His country had paid the first three instalments of its pledge of $5 million over a five-year period made at the 2013 High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Financial Sustainability of UNRWA. It would also fulfil its pledges made at the 2014 Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza. He commended the Governments and donor institutions that had raised their levels of support, and expressed his delegation's appreciation for UNRWA personnel, who carried out their duties under extremely difficult circumstances.

52. **Mr. Salih** (Sudan) said that the Commissioner-General's report had shown how the occupation affected virtually every aspect of daily life for the inhabitants of camps in Occupied Palestinian Territory. The poverty and despair had been heightened by the deteriorating situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. The most effective way to reduce dependence on UNRWA would be to lift the siege immediately and allow the movement of persons and goods necessary for reconstruction. Unfortunately, the occupying Power continued not only to besiege Gazans, but also to restrict the movement of UNRWA personnel, in violation of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the Specialized Agencies.

53. UNRWA would continue to play an essential role until such time as the parties to the conflict reached a permanent solution that included the right of return and fair compensation in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). Meanwhile, the Agency was operating in difficult circumstances and under severe financial constraints. The funding shortfall threatened to undermine fulfilment by the Agency's 30,000 personnel of their responsibilities towards some

5 million refugees. He reminded delegations of paragraph 86 of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants contained in the very first resolution adopted by the current General Assembly session, which stated that United Nations entities such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNRWA and other relevant organizations required sufficient funding to be able to carry out their activities effectively and in a predictable manner.

54. **Mr. Aoki** (Japan) said that the role of UNRWA was more crucial than ever given the increasingly severe conditions faced by Palestine refugees due to conflicts in Gaza and Syria. His Government had announced two multi-year assistance packages that year; one for $6 billion, which would include capacity-building for 20,000 people in the Middle East and North Africa; and a $2.8 billion dollar package to support humanitarian needs and self-reliance for refugees and migrants, as well as host countries and communities. In addition, the importance of addressing immediate and long-term needs of refugees and displaced persons was highlighted in the Leaders' Declaration of the Ise-Shima Summit of the Group of Seven hosted by Japan in May

55. A long-time contributor to UNRWA, Japan had made its largest contributions to the Agency over the past two years. It had been pleased to welcome the Commissioner-General on a visit to exchange views with senior officials, the private sector, the media and Japanese non-governmental organizations working in Palestine. The international community must not forget the plight of Palestine refugees. His Government looked forward to continued work with UNRWA as the international community pursued a lasting solution to the issue.

56. **Ms. Abdullah** (Malaysia) said that the Agency's continued provision of critical services to Palestine refugees, despite difficult circumstances, was praiseworthy. Ironically, however, while the international community and agencies consistently sought to do more, or made endless suggestions for areas of priority, the root cause of the conflict — the prolonged and repressive military occupation — remained unresolved.

57. UNRWA was more necessary than ever, given the increasing volatility in the region and the growing violence, marginalization and poverty that continued to affect Palestine refugees. The Agency had shown great creativity in its programmes to ensure opportunities for Palestine refugees to rebuild their lives. Those programmes included Communications with Communities, which, through an advocacy campaign and extensive refugee community outreach, demonstrated how greater access to information by Palestine refugees could ensure their voices were heard.

58. The issue of the legal status of Palestine refugees in Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which had not been addressed since it was first raised by the Commissioner-General in 2008, deserved the attention of the international community. Though that remained an issue of concern for her delegation, it was nevertheless encouraged by successful UNRWA endeavours, such as the education of over 500,000 children, the conduct of 9.1 million primary health care consultations, social safety net assistance, and the provision of microfinance loans to more than 38,000 people. The Agency had also made commendable reforms to its core programming in the areas of education, health management and gender-equality focus.

59. Malaysia firmly believed in the sanctity of a school environment, in particular for displaced children who had experienced psychological trauma. Schools should provide a safe haven for Palestinian refugee children, and not compromise their ability to fully realize the benefits of education. She therefore welcomed the Agency's implementation of the recommendations made by the United Nations Board of Inquiry in 2015 in order to hold to account the parties responsible for the seven incidents in which UNRWA schools in Gaza were struck by projectiles or other munitions between 8 July and 26 August 2014. Her delegation also welcomed the commitment made by Jordan, Lebanon and the State of Palestine to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration. The Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict could be synergized with already existing additional protection under a separate legal framework to guarantee the inviolability of UNRWA school premises at all times. Continued cooperation between Member States and UNRWA in that area should be encouraged.

60. In conclusion, her delegation commended UNRWA for its efforts to broaden its donor base by, inter alia, strengthening relations with bilateral donor States, engaging with private partners, and nurturing ties with emerging markets.

61. **Mr. Yardley** (Australia) said that the deterioration of conditions in the region had made refugees increasingly reliant on UNRWA. He commended the Agency for continuing to operate in a difficult environment and maintaining its commitment to reconstruction in Gaza. He also acknowledged the

new Commissioner-General's commitment to reducing operating deficits. However, the projected $74 million budget shortfall for 2016 threatened the Agency's viability. He urged UNRWA to broaden its donor base so that it could be less dependent on the core group of traditional donors. As neutrality was one of the Agency's most important assets, its recently developed Neutrality Framework, its standard operating procedures, and its establishment of operational support officer positions were crucial for strengthening accountability.

62. His country had contributed to UNRWA every year since 1951, and had provided $106 million in core contributions and emergency funding since 2011. In an assessment of the Agency's performance conducted early in 2016, his Government had concluded that UNRWA was an effective partner for delivering key services and was committed to necessary reforms. In September, Australia had provided the first instalment of an additional $80 million in funding for the period 2016-2020. He expressed the hope that the Agency would continue to have a positive effect on the lives of Palestinians and a stabilizing impact on the entire region. However, a better future for Palestine refugees must ultimately rest on a political solution that resulted in Israel and a Palestinian State living side-by-side in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.

63. **Mr. Al-Zayani** (Bahrain) said that in their respective letters of transmittal attached to the Commissioner-General's report, the Commissioner-General had noted a general deep sense of despair and insecurity that ran through the Palestine refugee community, and the Chair of the UNRWA Advisory Commission had expressed his concern about the increasing volatility in the region, the considerable increase in violence in the West Bank and the number of sustained injuries and deaths mentioned in the report. Forced displacement, home demolition, construction of the separation wall and the closure of Gaza were continuing with impunity, in violation of the prohibition against collective penalties in article 33 of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Settlement activity was also going forward, in violation of the prohibition in article 49 of that Convention against the deportation or transfer by an occupying Power of parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupied. Israel was also continuing to destroy homes and displace their owners in Jerusalem, in violation of Security Council resolution 478 (1980).

64. That UNRWA was managing to operate under difficult circumstances was a testament to the success of the Agency's administrative reforms. He commended the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA for its second resource mobilization strategy for the period 2016-2018 and its medium-term strategy for the period 2016-2021. Nevertheless, overcoming the budget shortfall without a reduction in services would require continued financial as well as moral support. UNRWA would remain a permanent fixture until the political roots of the Palestinian problem were addressed and Palestinians were able to exercise their right of return as provided for in paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

65. **Mr. Bouassila** (Algeria) said that his delegation appreciated the efforts of UNRWA to provide at least minimal levels of education, health care and housing to millions of refugees. The siege of Gaza, violent repression in the West Bank, restrictions on movement, forced displacement, home demolition, and other flagrant violations being committed by the occupation authorities not only increased the despair and frustration of Palestine refugees, but also increased the burdens placed on UNRWA.

66. His delegation called on the international community to do what was necessary to cover the Agency's budget shortfall and find new approaches to securing its financial future. He commended the Agency's second resource mobilization strategy for the period 2016-2018 and its medium-term strategy for the period 2016-2021. However, in the long term, the problem of the refugees could only be solved by a just resolution of the conflict that included the right of return. He condemned Israel's settlement policy, which was deliberately creating facts on the ground in order to undermine the two-State solution envisioned by the Arab Peace Initiative, and urged the international community to redouble its efforts towards establishing an independent Palestinian State that exercised full control over its natural resources, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

67. *Mr. Drobnjak (Croatia) resumed the Chair.*

68. **Mr. Agasandyan** (Russian Federation) said that recent events in the Middle East had turned many Palestinians into refugees for the second or even third time. Noting that the burden of caring for those refugees fell largely on UNRWA, he expressed appreciation for the efforts of that Agency's personnel to provide education, health care and social services for the millions of people held hostage to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and other regional upheavals. His country had made contributions to the Agency's budget in 2013 in 2015, and had repeatedly called for adequate funding for UNRWA within the

administrative and budgetary bodies of the General Assembly. The Russian Federation also provided direct assistance to the State of Palestine and to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, and had awarded several hundred scholarships for Palestinians to study in the Russian Federation.

69. UNRWA personnel in Occupied Palestinian Territory operated in a dangerous environment where conflict might flare up at any moment. Recently, they had also provided indispensable services to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic, particularly in the Yarmouk camp, which had been occupied by terrorists. Unlike certain other international agencies and despite external pressures, UNRWA had maintained its neutrality over the years. It was imperative for the Agency to continue its work until a just resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was reached. As a permanent member of the Security Council and a member of the Middle East Quartet, the Russian Federation would continue to work for a two-State solution. He called for greater use of the mediation potential of the Quartet, which had issued a report in July containing recommendations for overcoming the impasse in the peace process.

70. **Mr. Al-Mouallimi** (Saudi Arabia) said that his country was proud to be at the top of the list of donors to UNRWA, alongside the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom. In 2016 alone, the Saudi Fund for Economic Development had donated close to $100 million, including $59 million for housing, education and health projects in Gaza, the West Bank and Jordan. That Fund had also signed a memorandum of understanding that would provide $32 million for the reconstruction of more than 5,000 houses destroyed in the 2014 Israeli attack against Gaza, with priority given to households headed by women. It had also provided $10 million for the construction of a facility in Rafah in the South of the Gaza Strip that would serve as the main supply base and storage facility for UNRWA. That last project was part of a $62 million package that had been signed with UNRWA in May 2015. Saudi Arabia had also provided close to $2 million for the construction of a health centre in the Aqabat Jabr camp in the Jordan Valley, which had opened in October.

71. The Kingdom was also a leader in supporting UNRWA efforts on behalf of Palestine refugees in other parts of the Middle East. The education and employment opportunities provided by the Agency were the first line of defence against extremist ideologies. UNRWA had been an eyewitness to 70 years of catastrophe, 50 years of occupation and 10 years of the Gaza siege. In the light of the ongoing suffering, it was distressing to hear from the Commissioner-General that chronic budget shortfalls were threatening the Agency's capacities to respond to humanitarian needs. He commended measures taken to reduce administrative costs while maintaining the quality of services, and welcomed the recommendations contained in the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA. His delegation reiterated its call on donor States and institutions to step up their contributions and urged the United Nations to facilitate access for UNRWA to additional funding streams.

72. His country would continue to support UNRWA in its efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people until such time as the refugees could return to their homes and receive compensation in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The tragedy of the Palestinian people would not end as long as Israel continued to occupy Arab territory, violate international law and persist in its illegal settlement policies. Contrary to what the representative of Israel had said, the right of return was no idle dream, but an inalienable right. He called for the roots of the problem to be addressed by an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of 4 June 1967 and the establishment of an independent State of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital.

73. **Mr. Carroll** (Observer for the Holy See) said that UNRWA was active in territories that were historically part of the ancient Christian heartland. Greatly reduced in number, Christians of the region were among the refugees and internally displaced searching for peace and security abroad.

74. Like UNRWA, various entities and organizations of the Catholic Church provided education, health care and social services to refugees and the internally displaced. Those services, which included educational programmes for children and adults, and rehabilitation for those physically and mentally traumatized by incessant conflict, were provided to all in need regardless of creed. Generous donors associated with the Catholic Church around the globe made such activities possible. The work of the Holy See in the region, like that of UNRWA, was donor driven.

75. Jerusalem was the spiritual patrimony of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In that context, the Holy See renewed its support for a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question surrounding that city. Such a solution should, inter alia, ensure the freedom of religion and conscience of all its inhabitants, as well as secure, free and unhindered access to holy places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities.

76. Heinous crimes were being committed daily against refugee populations, affecting their education and health-care facilities and essential civilian infrastructure. Siege and bombardment were forcing Palestine refugees in Syria to once again flee as their camps became targets of military action.

77. Lebanon and Jordan had an enduring collaboration with UNRWA; along with some other countries in the region, they were contending heroically with the influx of refugees from Iraq and Syria. Lebanon desperately needed the attention and support of the international community to stabilize its institutions, to protect its citizens, and to deal with millions of refugees. Jordan, likewise, required international assistance to care for the millions of refugees in its territory, to guarantee security and social cohesion to its own people, and to fend off attempts by terrorist and extremist groups seeking to push Jordan into the violence plaguing the region.

78. Peacemaking and substantive dialogue, including bilateral negotiations, should replace the counterproductive illogic of violence and war in the Middle East. Military solutions and the support of client States or non-State actors by the industrialized nations of the world had only served to increase the number of civilian casualties. Accessible humanitarian assistance for the refugees and the internally displaced should replace the flood of weapons inundating the region from all over the globe. The international community should never give up hope that peace would eventually come to that significant and sacred land.

Statements made in exercise of the right of reply

79. **Ms. Radwan** (Saudi Arabia), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that she was sorry to have to take the floor again, but felt compelled to express her delegation's shock and surprise at the reference made to her country by the representative of Ecuador at the Committee's 21st meeting. Numerous UNRWA officials had praised the generous contributions made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Agency and to a host of Agency projects in areas ranging from infrastructure to housing to education. Her country had a long history of fruitful cooperation with UNRWA. She urged the representative of Ecuador to review the facts, and could only assume that the statement about Saudi Arabia had been made in error.

80. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that her delegation deplored the continued denial by Israel of the rights of Palestine refugees, including the right of return, which applied to all refugees under international law and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants recently adopted by world leaders. That right was neither an anachronism nor an entitlement to be enjoyed by some groups but not others on the basis of policies that ranged from distorted and irrational to blatantly discriminatory and illegal. She wondered how a State that clung to a past going back over 3,000 years to justify any and all actions, however illegal or cruel, could deny the Palestinian people's past of fewer than 70 years and justify severing the Palestinian connection to its ancestral homeland and negating their right to return to live at peace with their neighbours, as called for in General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and reaffirmed by overwhelming consensus and international law.

81. Decisions, policies and practices aimed at demographic purity had no basis in international law and no place in a civilized world; such legally, morally and ethically bankrupt policies would never bring peace or coexistence. No amount of clever public relations could repackage an injustice as something other than an injustice, and only justice could remedy it — not empty words and certainly not more violations. Israel must face the fact that the expulsion, uprooting and massacre of Palestinian civilians in 1948 — recognized by Israeli and other historians as a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing — had been a grave injustice.

82. Dismissing and belittling symbols such as the key to a home, held dear by Palestine refugees; equating Palestine refugees with teaching intolerance and hatred; and accusing UNRWA of bias in that regard were indicative of the illogical and rejectionist narrative that Israel continued to promote on the issue. Moreover, the claim that the Palestinian people and leadership did not want peace was completely disingenuous. She wondered how much more they must compromise and how much more suffering they must patiently and quietly endure until the Israeli Government acknowledged the Palestinian commitment to a just and peaceful solution and, in particular, the Palestinian recognition, exist over two decades ago, of the State of Israel and its right to exist, for which Israel had never reciprocated. Israel's continued propagation of such false claims exposed ill intent and an evasion of facts, as well as that Government's unwillingness to make the rights-based, justice-based peace that the State of Palestine had openly committed to in accordance with international law and the Arab Peace Initiative, which called for a just and agreed solution to the Palestine refugee question on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). It was high time for Israel to reciprocate and open the doors to a just, lasting peace and a better future

for Palestinian and Israeli children, which UNRWA and the international community were collectively striving to achieve. In conclusion, she said that the State of Palestine wished to express its deepest gratitude for every contribution, large and small, and for every expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

83. **Ms. Horsandi** (Israel) said that she was incredulous that the Syrian representative had had the audacity to blame Israel for the situation of Palestine refugees in Syria. According to the Commissioner-General of UNRWA himself, Agency staff members had been missing, detained, kidnapped or presumed to be detained in Syria, with the Syrian authorities refusing to allow UNRWA access to those staff members it had detained. She recalled that the Syrian Government had participated in the systematic killing of its own people and was starving the Palestinian community in the Yarmouk refugee camp to death.

84. Turning to the Board of Inquiry, which several representatives had mentioned, she pointed out that the Secretary-General had expressed dismay at the use by Hamas of United Nations schools to hide their weapons, as well as at that group's conduct of hostile activities against Israeli civilians from within United Nations premises or in their immediate vicinity, thereby endangering civilian lives by using them as human shields. She reiterated her Government's call for the resumption of negotiations, which the Palestinian leadership had regrettably refused on various occasions. Direct negotiations were the only way to achieve a two-State solution for two peoples living side by side in peace and security.

85. **Ms. Pereira** (Ecuador), responding to the remarks made by the representative of Saudi Arabia, said that she wished to apologize for the error and provide clarification regarding the misunderstanding that had arisen. Her delegation should have referred to paragraph 47 of the Commissioner-General's report about the Agency's continued payment of airport taxes and other fees, contrary to the agreement concluded between the United Nations and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1948. Instead, Ecuador had made its remarks in the context of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and other agreements that granted United Nations agencies protection and immunities for conducting their work. Ecuador endorsed the support provided to UNRWA by Saudi Arabia.

86. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the hypocrisy of the statements made by the representative of Israel came as no surprise. He wished to remind that representative, as she wept for the poor Palestinians and UNRWA personnel, that the party responsible for their suffering and bloodshed was the occupying Power. During its 2014 attack on Gaza, Israel had killed 11 UNRWA personnel, 530 Palestinian children, 302 women, 23 medical staff and 15 journalists. Some 10,870 people had been injured, including 2,100 women and 3,300 children, 1,000 of whom would be disabled for life. Israel's "reconstruction" efforts in Gaza had consisted of 8,210 rocket attacks, 15,736 naval shelling attacks and 36,718 artillery attacks. Those were the gifts from Israel to the children of Gaza.

87. **Ms. Radwan** (Saudi Arabia) said that her delegation appreciated the clarification provided by the representative of Ecuador as well as that delegation's patience and due diligence.

88. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)) said that although he appreciated the expressions of condolences, it would be preferable not to make them within the context of polarized statements. Follow-up with regard to the loss of staff members had been undertaken with the Governments of Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic and were a matter of public record.

89. He expressed his appreciation to the host and donor Governments that had supported the Agency over decades. Their support and contributions had made the formidable human development work possible. The commitments and pledges of support made during the current meeting were also very encouraging. It was his wish, however, that Palestinians would be recognized in collective efforts not only for their immense suffering but also for their skills, their abilities and their motivation.

90. He called for international action in response to the damage or destruction of 44 per cent of UNRWA schools during military incursions over the past five years alone. While great attention was paid to the need to protect medical missions, ambulances and medical personnel and installations, schools required equal and urgent attention.

91. Issues of access persisted, in particular with respect to the work of the Agency in the Syrian Arab Republic. That, however, was a matter to be discussed directly with the Syrian Government. The Agency would also engage in dialogue with the Israeli Government on the same topic.

92. The recognition of Member States was particularly heartening, given that when he had presented his first report to the Fourth Committee two

years ago, they had emphasized the need for Agency reform to promote efficiency and curtail expenditures. Member States now seemed to realize that UNRWA had taken serious action to address those concerns. And yet it now faced a paradox, highlighted by many, characterized by recurring financial issues. He wished to thank the United Arab Emirates for their additional financial contribution and looked forward to other such support to be able to close the year. He also looked forward to efforts to ensure greater financial stability, including through voluntary and assessed contributions.

93. UNRWA took the issue of efficiency very seriously. However, it should be recalled that it was the only agency within the United Nations system in which national staff were not paid against an international comparator. That raised issues of fairness that were of deep concern to UNRWA staff. Although there were a number of issues to be discussed in terms of how the Agency managed its financial situation, he understood the challenge that the situation presented to his Palestinian colleagues, who were asked to undertake greater efforts in terms of financial management.

94. He wished to reply to a number of the comments made the previous day by the representative of Israel. First, it should be emphasized that the term "refugees" was anchored in international law and could not be referred to with inverted commas. There was no claim of return mentioned in General Assembly resolution 194 (III); there was a right of return. However, the Agency was not mandated to advocate for that right.

95. Passing along the issue of the Palestine refugees to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees would require fundamental changes within the Fourth Committee as well as a review of the UNRWA mandate. More importantly, unlike the Agency, UNHCR had a resettlement mandate, an issue which, within the context of Palestine refugees, was sensitive.

96. He also wished to note that the spokesperson of the Commissioner-General should not be reviewed as such. He himself took full responsibility for all statements made by his spokesperson, as he would with respect to the conduct of any other staff member.

97. The representative of Israel had also commented on the failure of Agency school curricula to take the other into consideration. Objectively, that was a challenge in most conflict zones. In the publication, "Victims of Our Own Narratives? Portrayal of the 'Other' in Israeli and Palestinian Schoolbooks", it was pointed out that on both sides of the conflict, there was difficulty portraying or recognizing the rights of the "other". Approximately 90 per cent of Palestinian students growing up in the Gaza Strip had never left. Contrary to their parents and grandparents, they had never seen an Israeli. For that reason, their only notion of the latter was derived from military interventions or the results of the blockade. And, based on discussions with Israeli officials, there seemed to be a similar trend among Israeli youth. Very few had direct connections with or had ever met a Palestinian young person. How could such a situation be expected to serve as a basis for better future interaction or to build tolerance? The international community was collectively responsible for addressing that state of affairs. UNRWA, taking the matter very seriously, included human rights education in the curricula of its schools. However, it should be noted that the environment of the Gaza Strip was hardly conducive to increased tolerance. He was prepared to engage in dialogue with Israel on the issue.

98. On several occasions, he had asked senior Israeli military officials whether there was any proof that Hamas or any other Palestinian faction had fired rockets in the direction of Israel during the 2014 conflict, to which the answer had always been negative. In some instances, rockets had been fired from within the immediate vicinity of UNRWA installations. However, that was hardly surprising given the densely populated and urbanized landscape of Gaza. It should be noted that when Israeli security forces deployed into the Gaza Strip, some of their military units had also fired from within the vicinity of UNRWA and civilian installations. That was a matter of public record.

99. With regard to advocacy, the representative of Israel had implied that UNRWA devoted a significant portion of its resources to advocacy. That matter, which had not been documented, should be discussed bilaterally.

100. In conclusion, a just and lasting solution to the plight of Palestine refugees must be found. No amount of humanitarian aid or development efforts would ever make up for the denial of the dignity or the rights of any community in the world. It was very important to go beyond simple pledges of renewed allegiance to the two-State solution; international action was necessary to bring about a political solution. Palestine refugees should not have to rely on UNRWA for another 66 years for their immediate needs. UNRWA did not have a political mandate, and yet it was faced daily with the human costs of the unresolved political issue at the heart of the Middle East. In the meantime, the Agency would continue to fulfil its mandate with the support and encouragement of Member States.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.